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Trust in Relationships: A Study to Determine the Importance of Trust

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Trust in Relationships: A study to determine the importance of trust

(TITLE)

BY

Cara Cosentino

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DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Cara Cosentino

Trust in Relationships:

A study to determine the importance of trust

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Abstract

This research study was conducted to determine the importance of trust in relationships. To determine the difference in trust levels, opinions on being hurt by an intimate partner are studied next to the participants' opinions of being hurt by a close friend. Surveys were completed by 65 participants ages 18-24 on Eastern Illinois University's campus. The survey was nine questions long and had mainly multiple choice answer options. Results were surprising on participants' levels of trust. Every participant believed that trust was the key factor in making an intimate relationship work, yet an almost exact 50% of the participants had experienced infidelity or a breach of trust with their partner. This study was a great stepping-stone to open doors into a deeper study of trust between intimate and platonic relationships.

Trust in Relationships:
A study to determine the importance of trust

Trust: such a short word should be so simple to understand. Yet, this five letter word has been the sole cause of countless studies, built friendships, ruined relationships, affected business, and impacted lives in many ways. According to Merrium-Webster's online dictionary, trust can be defined as an "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength or truth of someone or something." However, how can anyone ever be sure that the person or thing that they are putting their reliance in will not let them down? Is there such a feeling as absolute trust in another person, and if so, what is needed for this confidence to develop?

In this day and age, people are programmed from a young age that people will hurt you. Fathers tell their young daughters that he is the only man that will never hurt her, and mothers reinforce this notion by being everything she can be for her children to protect them from any harm. There is no way to pinpoint when a person first experiences loss of trust. Unfortunately, all human beings are exposed to this pain at many different points of life, or so it is assumed. Every single person is unique and personalities differ in unimaginable ways. Trust is assumed to be needed by every person on this planet and that is learned when students are taught of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The third out of the five needs in his pyramid is psychological needs. Psychological needs are a need to feel love, belonging, and acceptance from people. Trust fits right into that category.

In society today, people have attitudes of sharks. Every man is out for the benefit of him and no one else. Television shows highlight and feed off of betrayal and other people's pain. Shows that are supposed to portray "reality" can even ruin people's trust by how fraudulent the actual reality in the filming of the show is. Regardless of what can be shown on a television, no CEO rose to the top of a company without putting trust in a family or business member at some

point. It is common to see tough alibis being the front and center personality trait of people that have been hurt by loss of trust and because of this, guards are put up to prevent the healing person from ever feeling that pain again. Without even realizing it, even the toughest of all people trust in others on a daily basis. People must trust a person to get into a car with them, they must trust that the cook at the restaurant checked the temperature of the chicken before it was served, and they have to even trust in their computer software that it will save and safely hold the presentation for the business meeting the next day.

This study will work to determine how important trust is in personal relationships for college-aged students. Outside research will branch out to cover intimate relationships, long-distance relationships, trust in financial situations, and even evaluate studies that try to connect trust to neurological functions. Men and women have different opinions on many different things, and this study will aim to discover if the two sexes have similar views on the importance or unimportance of trust between partners. Focusing on students in college, this study will cover communication within a couple after mistrust, address different opinions between intimate relationships and friendship, and inner turmoil caused by cheating.

Review of Literature

Many studies have been done on trust. On the online search database EBSCOhost, documented research dates back as far as 1866. This particular study takes a deeper look into trust in intimate relationships in an attempt to determine how important trust really is. Prior research has been evaluated in many different aspects of trust to gain a common ground understanding of how people feel in these separate situations.

Net Industries, a company that provides free online encyclopedias, discusses how trust is something that can be built up and also broken down. The website also writes how trust is a

change in behavior due to positive experiences in the past and hope for the future. Trusting a person does not mean that they will not betray or hurt, it is just faith in the thought that they will not. In many instances, prior experiences can even impact trust levels with a new partner. This will be vital information in the study because this researched is focused on college relationships. It is not impossible, but it is rare nowadays that a person's first partner is their last. Because of this change in society, people have assumptions of what will come of a relationship before they even open up to a person.

In the research conducted by Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Rubin (2010), sets of couples were studied and put through tests. The first group was long distance couples and they kept a diary for fourteen days and then videotaped as they tried to resolve issues that took place during that diary period. The second group was of older couples that lived together and kept a twenty-one day diary. The purpose of the study was to try and determine if couples that trust their partners experience fewer fluctuations in the evaluations. The information from this study is crucial because the findings determine if trust is a key to happiness in a relationship.

In South Korea, it is believed that without trust, a society would not be able to hold together and function. Choi and Han (2008) believe that "trust must be earned and formed" much like it is on our society. This study is very interesting because even with the different cultures, trust is still seen as a vital component to have with other people. Even though it does not directly correlate with intimate relationships in the correct age group, it discusses overall development of trust.

Surprisingly, there is not just one type of trust that people have. According to Freitag and Traunmuller (2009), there are three different spheres of trust. In this study, the two types of trust that are mainly focused on are abstract trust and intimate trust. This is especially interesting

because not only is there research on three different types of trust, the study goes even further to see if the three studies must coexist or if they can stand on their own. Particularized trust is between people in which interactions occur on a daily basis. The other type is generalized trust that involved people with minimal interactivity and strangers. Association with the three different types of trust can be tied into the research evaluations.

There has been a shift in society for the age in which people get married. People casually date, have fun, and want to pursue careers before they settle down. Rijt (2006) discusses this need for creating an extensive social network before committing. It seems as if people want to have it all before choosing what is best. Because of this notion, relationships in this current age take much more trust than they used to. This study looks back at the serious relationships that were formed many years ago and attempts to decipher what has caused the difference. This will tie into research because of the assumption that previous experiences alter trust for future encounters.

Research done by Zak, Gold, Ryckman, and Lenney (1998) is completely relevant to the study because it looks at college students' relationships and even the levels of trust that they have in themselves. The three categories of expectation for trust are predictability, dependability, and faith. According to Zak, Gold, Ryckman, and Lenney, the stages advance in order to develop the level in which another person can be trusted. It could be a long process to secure full trust in a partner because of the assessment that occurs internally at each stage. However, the benefits of having a relationship complete with trust are worth the time of building the trust up.

Because the study is based for students on a college campus, trust in long distance relationships must be looked at as well. Pistole, Roberts, and Chapman (2010) completed a study on attachment issues that come with long distance relationships. The study also addresses what

can happen to a relationship when it starts at a close distance and has to convert to a long distance. When a couple does not know how to properly argue or resolve disagreements without being face to face, a relationship can be driven into a hole that is unfixable. Trust multiplies when there is a long distance gap, and with the concentration on trust, more apprehension to trust also grows.

Pistole, Roberts, and Mosko (2010) completed a study that compares long distance couples with geographically close distance ones. This particular study had findings that are uncommon. These authors found that the long distance couples had higher satisfaction because they missed their partner so much while they were apart. They also found that close distance relationships have low avoidance levels and low caregiving levels. The long distance couples may be stronger when they are together but the study does not determine what it is like for the couples while they are spending the time apart. The stress on trust when at a distance creates an instant relief when the person is near, thus creating overwhelming happiness upon encounter with the partner.

In a study written by Berzon (2004), it was found that long distance relationships have a greater relational stability than close distance couples. These couples need to adapt to find the ways that best work for their partnership and that is stressful on the relationship, but after that the stability is greater. It was also found in this study that the couples that are so great apart are at risk of falling apart when they spend an extended amount of time together. For instance, if a relationship adapts to be long distance and then the couple buys a house together. This can relate to the trust in relationships because of couples are apart for so long that they get used to the distance, they may push trust apprehension away just to avoid the arguments all together, then once they are at a close distance again, the problems can surface.

Area of Study

The research has shown that trust is vital in a relationship. There have been in depth studies on different types of trust, trust in different relationships, and close versus long distance couples. However, there was only one study that was focused on college students and that study was not concerned with intimate relationships as much as it was with any type of relationship. Through all of this, two research questions along with two hypotheses have been formed to try and create a foundation for the study of trust in intimate relationships.

RQ1: Is trust the key factor in making a relationship work?

RQ2: If trust is lost with a partner, can it ever be gained back?

H1: Trust will be unanimously found across all of the surveys to be the most important factor in relationships.

H2: Minimal (25% or less) people in the study will say that they would not be able to trust a person again after the trust was ruined. The people that believe that it is possible for forgive will be people in long-term relationships.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects in this study were 65 men and women ages 18 to 24. These men and women were chosen at random around Eastern Illinois University's campus so long as they were willing to spare a few minutes to complete the survey. There are no benefits or risks correlated with the survey and having it be only nine questions, finding people willing to take part was not a difficult task. No specific demographics are necessary for the study; this is a general study to see how people react to trust in relationships.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study is a nine-question survey that has a few basic demographic questions, and multiple-choice questions. An example of this instrument can be found in Appendix A of this paper. The questions were built to discover if trust could be rebuilt in both an intimate relationship and a relationship with a friend. The survey is based to do the research on intimate relationships but in order to see how the people react different in a platonic relationship from an intimate one, they both have to be analyzed.

Q: After what amount of time do you consider a relationship to be long term?

Analyzing this will be done by putting all of the answers into an excel spreadsheet and finding the average amount of time chosen by all of the participants. It is important to see what the general surveyed public believes to be long term in order to relate the findings to the prior research.

Q: Have you ever been in what you consider to be a long-term relationship?

Determining if the participant has been in a long-term relationship is also crucial when looking at the data because they can have a different view on the rest of the survey questions.

Q: Have you ever been cheated on or experienced infidelity in your relationship?

When someone has a series of relationships but they are not committed for a long time, it could be more common for them to experience infidelity. Connecting this question with the one directly before about being a part of a long term relationship will hopefully make that a researched answer instead of just a hypothesis.

Q: If yes, what did you do after discovering your partner's breach of trust?

This question gives the options of: 1) Leave him or her, 2) Talk things out and forgive, 3) Retaliate and make things even, 4) Other (please explain). Seeing how a person dealt with the infidelity is very useful to see if they feel the trust is forever gone or just needs to be worked on.

Q: Have you ever been hurt by a close friend?

A reaction to a wrongful experience in a friendship can sometimes be as detrimental as a ruined intimate relationship. This is a necessary comparison between the platonic friendships and the intimate relationship to see the average view on the difference of the trust in each.

Q: How was healing from this experience different than a breach of trust from an intimate partner?

This is a necessary question to be studied as a way to continue the comparison on a deeper level from the above question. Otherwise the survey would not reach the depths that it is intended to explore.

Q: Do you consider trust to be the key factor in making your intimate relationships work?

Is there one thing that drives a relationship to be successful? It will be interesting to see the responses of this portion because some people trust automatically and others feel that it must be earned.

Procedure

The study was conducted by use of surveys. The questions that are explained above are all short and to the point. Before completing a survey, they participants had to read the consent form but no signature was required. The surveys were distributed around campus to willing participants that had a few minutes of free time. Once the surveys were completed, they were

collected and placed into a folder in a random order. Because no signature was needed, there was no threat to compromising anonymity.

The surveys were distributed and results were added into an Excel spreadsheet as the number of surveys grew. Each survey was numbered as it was entered in to the spreadsheet so that the surveys with explanation in the “other” categories could be easily tracked down to review. From there, each answer was plugged in with the correlating number for the multiple choice of the question. Results were then tallied up to match and compare to prior research.

Results

Because the results for the study were recorded and sorted through Microsoft Excel, it was simple to analyze. Once all 65 surveys were entered into the program, the data was entered into SPSS for further analysis. With SPSS, a frequency count was completed on the data for the percentages to be acquired. The designed charts made the information easy to interpret and it was clear that both of the research questions were answered with the results from the survey.

Research question one, “Is trust the key factor in making a relationship work” was answered specifically with question number nine on the survey. This question simply stated, “Do you consider trust to be the key factor in making your intimate relationships work?” Hypothesis one believed that trust would in fact be found as the most important factor in relationships with every participant of the study. Because the question on the survey only gave the options of yes or no, there is not a deeper depth that can be explored. There was a 100% unanimous agreement that trust is the key factor in making an intimate relationship work. Also, the survey limited research by specifying trust is a key factor in an “intimate” relationship. This does answer the research question to the fullest extent because it leaves room for discussion of what the results would have been if the same question had focused on a platonic relationship.

Research question two was aimed to determine if a partner could regain trust after it is lost. Hypothesis two believed that a minimal amount (25% or less) of the people surveyed would not be able to trust a person again after a breach of trust occurred, thus resulting in ruining the relationship's trust. Also, the hypothesis claimed that the people whom believe forgiveness is possible would be the people in long-term relationships. Of the 65 participants, 36 defined a long-term relationship as lasting 9+ months. This calculated out to 55.4% of the answers. Not far off was the category of 6-8 months as a long-term relationship with 25 participants choosing it. The 38.5% for that category then has a huge leap to the 6.2% (4 participants) that believe a relationship is classified as long term within 3-5 months. The results of losing all trust and forgiving were surprisingly close. Because question number six on the survey was specific to only be answered if the participant had been cheated on, the results are out of 36 instead of 65. Question six asks what the participant did after discovering their partner's breach of trust. The multiple-choice answers and percentages can be seen in Appendix B. In the short answer space provided for the other category, participants all wrote different reactions. Two admitted that they were the partner to do the cheating; one participant saying she never told the other person and the other said that he admitted to everything and knows karma will get him in due time. Others said that they forgave, but the trust never came back, one couple broke up right away but got back together to try again, and the last said that she forgave him and he cheated again driving her away for good.

When analyzing the surveys, I was curious to see if there would be any correlation between long-term relationships and cheating. I created the hypothesis that the category that had been in long-term relationships would contain fewer instances of cheating. It was appalling to discover that 50.8% of total participants have been cheated on or experienced infidelity in a

relationship. Almost an exact 50/50 division of the participants has experienced a breach of trust. It did not matter if the participant had been in a long-term relationship at any point in their life or not, the results were still virtually the same. For a group of participants that believed 100% trust was the most important factor in relationships, there sure is a large issue with trust being true and real.

Discussion

Trust is a topic that has been researched countless times. It is a difficult area to measure because it can mean so many different things to each individual. Trust can be stable, morph, and fluctuate. The absence of trust in a relationship results in more struggles for the couple. In the study done by Campbell, Boldry, and Simpson (2010), the effects due to the lack of trust became clearer. In this study multiple couples were asked to keep a journal of their everyday interactions with the partner and track any arguments or fluctuations. The study also had couples partake in conflict resolution activities while being filmed. It was over a two-week period with the journal keeping and workshops in front of the camera. At the end of the study, the journals were collected, read and carefully analyzed. The study ended up showing that there was a direct connection between low trust levels and the negative experiences in the relationships.

Net Industries has an extensive write up about different levels of trust and the degrees to which it affects relationships. An interesting part about this study is the point in which past experiences, even with a parent or previous partner, can tie so heavily into the trust levels. If a couple has one partner who trusts whole-heartedly and the other has bouts of mistrust, the relationship will still struggle and eventually the trusting partner will no longer have total faith. The trust can dwindle away without the trusting member of the relationship even realizing that their thoughts and feelings were changing. This research can be further looked at in the

discussion of future research. Questions could be added to the survey to divulge deeper into the mindset of the situation and see if a person carries the hurt of a previous relationship into the limelight of a new one. The research could look at how being mistreated by one individual affects any future relationships and if the memory of the infidelity ever gets erased or is overcome.

The research done by Freitag and Traunmuller (2009) focuses on different spheres of trust that is evident in all relationships. With the ultimate two types of trust, intimate and abstract, every person that the trustier comes in contact with contains their own level. In this study, intimate trust would pertain both to a partner and close friend because they define it as anyone close to the trustier. Intimate trust can also be interchanged with particularized trust. This embodies everyone that the trustier interacts with on a day-to-day basis (family members, close friends, co-workers, and neighbors). The survey that was used to determine the importance of trust and the difference between intimate and friendship can be correlated with much that is said in agreement. It also states that, "Trust is a general propensity either innate or learned early in life and is this primarily a personal predisposition." (Freitag&Traunmuller, 2009, pg. 787). This research would come in handy when analyzing the results to the future study. I do believe that it is true where people have an initial notion involving trust based off of childhood experiences. Another factor that could be added into future research would be questioning the participant if their parents were still together. This is a personal question, but with the complete anonymity there is no risk of knowing the identity of the subject.

Prior research by Zak, Gold, Ryckman, and Lenney (1998) determined that trust develops through three stages. It begins with predictability and then morphs into dependability as it grows. Finally, when full trust is reached, faith takes over. In the study to determine the importance of

trust in relationships, the overall aspect of trust is measured instead of the different stages of it. Questions could have been added to determine at what point of a relationship the infidelity occurred and then correlated with this study to see what point of the trust growth the breach of trust happened. Since the results showed that it was split pretty 50/50 between people who had been in long-term relationships and those participants that had never experienced one, this study would be an interesting addition.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study are heavy. Much future research can be stemmed off of it because there are many unanswered questions. One limitation was the amount of surveys that were handed out. There should have been a larger group to analyze a wider gap. While 65 is a lot of participants, more would have shown greater results across the board. If the research were to be expanded, the first thing to be done would be to generate a larger group of participants.

Further limitations stretch into the questions that were used on the survey. After analyzing results it became clear that more could have been discovered with slight changes in the questions. For instance, to determine the true difference between a breach of trust between a friend and an intimate partner, the same question should have been asked with only the clarification of who it was about being changed. The survey questions 6 and 8 are to determine the difference between the reactions of being hurt. Yet, they do not offer the same choices so the answer could never be that it was the same. The multiple-choice answers in number 6 contain actions that would be done (1. Leave him or her, 2. Talk things out and forgive, 4. Retaliate and make things even, 4. Other) and the multiple choice answers for number 8 are just compared to 6 and not actions (1. It was no different, 2. They do not mean as much to me, 3. There are different reactions from a friend and a partner, 4. Other). This was also a limitation because some

participants had been hurt by an intimate partner and never felt that a friend had hurt them. There was no option other than “other” to explain that situation.

Question number 9 (Do you consider trust to be a key factor in making your intimate relationships work?) is a crucial question to the survey. In future research however, adding a question to determine if participants believe trust to be a key factor in making platonic relationships work as well would be necessary. That way, a true grasp of the importance of trust could have been reached instead of comparing trust in an intimate relationship and a platonic relationship but only finding the real result of it being a key factor in an intimate one.

Future research would encompass a much larger age gap. The current research only surveyed people ages 18-24. At this point, most everyone has had similar life experiences. It would be interesting to be able to study a different generation as well. By opening up the survey to a larger age group, a study through the years would be able to be looked at. Through that, different trends in infidelity could be tracked, the amount of trust in people could be looked at, and it would be interesting to add a question to see if there was even a difference in married couples. Asking professors could have accomplished this if they had a free moment after class or arranging appointments with people on campus. The survey was only nine questions so it did not take up much time to fill out.

Another aspect that I would like to look into more with future research would be to see if the ruined trust from one relationship affects views on relationships in the future. This was overlooked in the creation of the last survey but in comparison to the prior studies, it would have helped. The published research studies touched base with this idea but results depended on which study was being analyzed. All that would have needed to be added was one or two questions to determine if trust is ruined forever in general or just with the person that completed the act. In

addition to this, the survey only asked if a breach of trust occurred in the relationship, it never clarified if the person taking the survey or the partner of that person ruined the trust. Two participants admitted in the “other” category on question 6 that it was in fact them that took part in the breach of trust. Of those two, just one admitted to the infidelity and regretted the decision; the other never even told the partner that they had cheated and continued to date them, knowing what had been done.

An interesting aspect to research in an extended study would be seeing what type of childhood the participant comes from. With the pre-research planting the idea that trust is learned at an early age, the experiences of love and intimate relationships are picked up on as a person ages. I am curious to see if a person that was raised in a traditional home has a different view of trust, especially predisposed trust, than a person who has divorced parents or was maybe raised by a single parent. There have been people I have met in life that are much more apprehensive to open up because they had witnessed parents fall in and out of love or been children of divorce. Adding a question to the survey simply asking what their parental situation was would open up multiple doors to new research abilities.

Conclusion

To formulate a conclusion on people’s beliefs of trust in relationships, a short nine-question survey was created. This study was conducted of all Eastern Illinois University students. With a sample set of 65 participants who took the survey, one hundred percent of the participants believe that trust is a key factor in intimate relationships. In addition, almost an exact fifty percent have experienced a form of infidelity or a breach of trust within relationships with a partner. That number causes a wave of disgust over today’s society that washed over me. It is

possible that the results were that way because of the age group surveyed, but even still, if it was an older sample set of participants they would have been through this stage of life.

The participants felt that intimate partners had ruined trust more often than the answers for the close friends. Future studies can show more in depth results with the friendships and hopefully further disclose the ultimate differences in trust levels. With the results that have been collected, a solid starting point has been established as a great base for more research. It would be very intriguing to see what other directions the study can turn. The results were not exactly startling. The research questions were answered to a certain extent but the research is not as far as it could go.

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Appendix A

Survey of Trust in Relationships

Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey. Answer each question to the best of your ability by circling the answer that is most relevant to you.

1. What is your age? _____
2. Please circle your gender.
 1. Male
 2. Female
3. After what amount of time do you consider a relationship to be long term?
 1. 1-2 months
 2. 3-5 months
 3. 6-8 months
 4. 9+ months
4. Have you ever been in what you consider to be a long term relationship?
 1. Yes
 2. No
5. Have you ever been cheated on or experienced an act of infidelity in your relationship?
 1. Yes
 2. No
6. If yes, what did you do after discovering your partner's breach of trust?
 1. Leave him or her
 2. Talk things out and forgive
 3. Retaliate to make things even
 4. Other (please briefly explain)

7. Have you ever been hurt by a close friend?
 1. Yes
 2. No
8. How was healing from this experience different than a breach of trust from an intimate partner?
 1. It was no different
 2. They do not mean as much to me
 3. There are different reactions from a friend and a partner
 4. Other (please briefly explain)

9. Do you consider trust to be the key factor in making your relationship work?
 1. Yes
 2. No

Table 1

Table of Question 6

Answer	Number	Percentage
1. Leave him or her	15	41.7%
2. Talk things out and forgive	13	36.1%
3. Retaliate to make things even	3	8.3%
4. Other	5	13.9%